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ABSTRACT

In this investigation, 72 second-, fourth-, sixth-, and eighth-grade speakers of black English were studied in an attempt to determine whether a relationship exists between the speaking of black English and the reading of standard English. Two variables of oral language were examined: the degree of divergence from standard English and the ability to code-switch from black English to language closer to standard English. It was hypothesized that those children whose variety of black English most closely resembled standard English and those children who were best able to code-switch would be the best readers. The scores for dialect variety and code-switching were correlated with raw scores from the SRA Assessment Survey reading subtest. In addition, the oral language variables were correlated with grade level and sex variables. Analysis of the data indicated that the degree of divergence of the subjects' speech from standard English showed no significant relationship to their reading scores, that the ability to code-switch showed no significant relationship to reading scores, and that findings related to grade level and sex differentials were largely nonsignificant. (GW)

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Speaking Black and Reading Standard (English)

That the reading achievement of black children is significantly below their white peers is a widely reported finding (Coleman, 1966; Jencks, 1972). A number of explanations for the differences has been advanced. The theory to be considered here comes from a group of linguists and educators (Baratz, 1969; Stewart, 1969; Labov, 1972; Simons, 1974). They have considered the dialect of black children as a possible influence on differential reading achievement. Such an explanation is expected since previous research shows a significant relationship between oral language development and reading achievement (Loban, 1963; Ruddell,1965). Robert Ruddell, for example, found that children were more successful in comprehending written passages that utilized high frequency patterns from their oral language than other passages that utilized low frequency patterns.

Baratz and Stewart have speculated about how such an oral language/reading relationship might affect black English speakers. Baratz contends that a speaker of black English has a more complex decoding task than does a speaker of standard English. Like his standard English counterpart, she maintains, the black English speaker first decodes standard English print into sounds, words, and sentences. Unlike the standard Eng-

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lish speaker, however, the user of black English must decode a second time in order to translate the standard English sounds, words, and sentences into the pronunciation and syntax of the more familiar code which is black English. Stewart has pointed out that this second decoding may accumulate over large amounts of reading matter so that comprehension is impeded.

The attempt to find evidence to support or reject this hypothesis is important. If nonstandard speakers do have difficulty comprehending standard English print, changes either in the children's language or in their reading materials should be explored. On the other hand, such changes are not necessary if black English causes no special problems in learning to read.

The evidence provided by previous research in this area has not been conclusive. One group of studies (Gross, 1967; Wiggins, 1970; Labov, 1972; Baratz, 1973) found that better readers among samples of black children exhibited more standard English pronunciations and/or grammatical features than did poorer readers. Other investigators (Melmed, 1973; Karlsen, 1974), however, have reported that although their black subjects displayed nonstandard oral language, they had no unusual difficulty comprehending printed standard English.

Certain limitations, too, have been identified in prior research. For instance, atypical populations such as gang members, first grade parochial school students, and above average readers were sampled in three important studies

(Labov, 1972; Baratz, 1973; Melmed, 1973, respectively). Other studies have focused narrowly on just several of the many black English features (Wiggins, 1970; Karlsen, 1974). In addition, each study was limited to 1) data collection at one grade or age level, and 2) oral language samples collected in only one speech setting. The study reported here was an attempt to shed further light on the dialect/reading issue by resolving some of the problems of previous research. These resolutions will become evident as the study is described.

This research attempted to discover which, if any, black English speakers are likely to encounter problems in reading. To do this, variations in the language of a sample of black children were ascertained and compared to variations in their reading ability.

Dialect variety was the first oral language variable examined. It was first identified by Stewart in 1964 and is defined by this researcher as the number and frequency of black English features found in certain speech samples of subjects. A list of thirty-two phonological, morphological, and syntactical features of black English such as "aks" for ask, "boy" for boys, and "she tired" for the standard she is tired was derived from the work of Dillard (1972) and Wolfram and Fasold (1974). Children who used few of these black English features infrequently were said to speak a variety of the dialect which closely resembled standard English. Those who used many of the features with greater frequency were described

as speakers of a more divergent variety. It was hypothesized that children whose variety of black English closely resembled standard English would be better readers than those whose dialect differed greatly.

A second variable studied was code-switching ability. This refers to the ability to use different varieties of black English in two different settings, one conducive to black English usage, the other to standard English. It was assumed that children who could code-switch would use fewer features of black English with less frequency in a setting which facilitated standard English usage than they would in a setting in which black English was appropriate. The hypothesis was made that subjects who did more code-switching from their variety of black English to one more closely resembling standard English would be better readers than those who did less.

In order to test the hypotheses, seventy-two black English speakers, thirty-six girls and thirty-six boys, from a school district in central Illinois were subjects. They were randomly chosen from the total black populations of the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth grades of three Title I schools. A few subjects were not black English speakers. In these cases, other subjects were randomly chosen.

Two samples of sustained speech were obtained from each subject in order to measure dialect variety and code-switching ability. Speech Sample I was recorded in a setting assumed to be conducive to black English usage: a black English speaking interviewer established a relaxed, informal atmosphere in a

small room in the subjects' schools. For each subject, she played a black English version of the story J.T. by Jane Wagner, which takes place in an inner-city environment in the United States and involves black, contemporary characters. Afterwards, subjects retold the story to a classmate, using the accompanying pictures as a guide. Their narratives were taped.

Conversely, Speech Sample II was recorded in a setting assumed to be conducive to standard English usage. The researcher, a white female, established a formal atmosphere as interviewer. In a small room in the subjects' schools, she played a tape of the story The Red Balloon by Lamorisse, read by a standard English speaker, for each subject. The story takes place in Paris and the major characters are white and noncontemporary. When the story was over, subjects were told to use "proper school talk" and to use the accompanying pictures as a guide in their narrative. The interviewer listened to and tape recorded the retellings.

The method for obtaining speech samples was validated by a jury of experts from the University of Illinois after they had reviewed a description of the instrument and data from the pilot study. The reliability of the speech samples was determined by the split-half method. Correlation coefficients corrected by the Spearman-Brown formula were .93 and .90 for Speech Samples I and II respectively.

The two narratives were transcribed and codified by the

researcher. Ten percent of the tapes were also analyzed by an independent judge in order to ascertain coding reliability. Correlations between coders ranged from .58 to .89. For the coding, transcribed speech samples were divided into communication units and the black English features used in twenty units of each sample were noted and categorized. Two scores for dialect variety were obtained, one for the number of different types of black English features used in Speech Sample I and another for the frequency of their occurance. Similarly, two scores for code-switching were obtained, one for the contrast between the number of different black English features used in the two speech samples and other for the contrast in frequency of their occurance.

The scores for dialect variety and code-switching were correlated with raw scores from the SRA Assessment Survey reading subtest. In addition, a two-way analysis of variance was performed for each oral language variable in order to assess possible grade level and sex differences. When F ratios were significant, a Duncan Test was performed to examine post hoc comparisons. Results of the statistical tests follow.

1. Whether subjects spoke a variety of black English that closely resembled standard English, or conversely, that differed greatly showed no significant relationship to their performance on the reading subtest.

2. The degree to which subjects code-switched from

black English to a dialect more closely resembling standard English showed no significant relationship to their performance on the reading test.

3. Dialect variety, as measured by number and frequency of phonological, morphological, and syntactical features used showed no significant relationship to subjects grade level. Interestingly, when phonological features were eliminated from the analysis and morphological and syntactical features alone were studied across grade levels, it was found that subjects in the eighth grade used significantly less divergent black English than did second graders.

4. Ability to switch from a black English dialect to one more closely resembling standard English showed no significant relationship to a subject's grade level.

5. The sex of subjects did not relate significantly to either dialect variety or to ability to code-switch.

The largely nonsignificant findings of this study may be accounted for by at least four factors. First, an assumption made about the settings in which speech samples were collected may be unfounded. It was posited that the first speech setting would be more facilitative to black English usage than the second. A study of code-switching scores, however, shows that subjects did not always react predictably to the settings; ten of the seventy-two subjects used more divergent black English in the second setting than the first. However, as the vast majority of subjects did code-switch as anticipated, this factor is not a likely explanation for the null findings.

A second possible reason for the results concerns a supposition made about the instrument used to obtain the speech samples. A narrative constituted Speech Sample I which was intended to be a sample of subjects' more divergent variety of black English. It is possible, however, that use of a narrative is not the best way to study maximum divergence from standard English. Recording and analyzing everyday speech used in playground, lunchroom, and on the street may be a better way. Due to limitations of the study, such a speech variety could not be obtained. Moreover, if black English speakers do indeed control several varieties of their dialect, it is unlikely that they apply their more divergent variety when encountering print in a school setting.

A third factor which might account for the results concerns a decision for analyzing the speech samples. It had to do with the equal weighting of all black English features in the coding procedure. That is, each feature used, whether phonological, morphological or syntactical, was assigned one point. When examining the features for their probable interference in reading, however, some seemed more important than others. The syntactical and morphological features, for instance, would tend to be greater obstacles to comprehending standard English print than would phonological differences which are also evident among regional dialects. However, when phonological features were factored out of the dialect variety and code-switching scores so that use of morphological and syntactical features alone were correlated with reading

achievement, no significant relationships were found.

A fourth and, in this researcher's opinion, most likely explainer for the nonsignificant results is that the hypotheses that guided the present study were inaccurate descriptions of the relationships among the variables investigated. That is to say that speaking a variety of black English close in structure to standard English or being able to code-switch to such a minimally divergent dialect seemingly has no relationship to the ability to read. This noninterference position, as it has been referred to in the literature, has certain implications.

One is that the use of materials written in black English would not be cognitively more advantageous than use of standard English materials. However, use of such materials to help change negative attitudes toward reading held by low-achieving black students, for example, should not be ruled out. A second implication is that no case should be made for the acquisition of standard English or for the eradiciation of black English in order to facilitate better reading. Acquiring standard English for other purposes such as social and economic mobility is another issue, beyond the scope of this study. A third implication, this one in the form of a recommendation, concerns the acceptance of black childrens' dialects by their teachers. If it is the case that black English does not interfere with reading, a black child's translation of standard English print into his more familiar code during oral reading should be accepted rather than corrected. This now familiar argument

was originally advanced by Kenneth Goodman in 1973. Furthermore, such acceptance implies a knowledge of black English by teachers so they can distinguish between the use of a dialect feature and a reading error.

To summarize the implications of the study, it can be said that attempts to make written materials more like black English or to make black English more like standard seem fruitless in terms of improving the reading skills of black English speakers. Instead, changes in teacher attitudes about the dialect as well as increased knowledge about it seem warranted.

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